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SUBJECT: UNSC: U/SYG ON THE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN
SUDAN, SOMALIA AND ETHIOPIA

Summary

¶1. (U) On December 6 John Holmes, UN Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, briefed an open session of the Security Council following his recent mission to Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia (as well as Nairobi, Kenya to meet with donors and UN staff working on Somalia). Holmes stopped short of calling the humanitarian situation in Ogaden a "catastrophe" and he welcomed the recent expansion of UN presence in the Somali region of Ethiopia, but he admitted that conditions could be worse in areas that had yet to be assessed. Holmes described a "gradually deteriorating" humanitarian situation in Darfur, recalling Government of Sudan (GOS) commitments to facilitate the ongoing relief work and stressing that conditions are not yet appropriate for large-scale returns. Holmes called on the international community not to forget Somalia, but he did not provide any concrete recommendations to address the security conditions that limit access to the populations in need. Security Council members expressed wide support for monitoring these three situations as well as the need for political reconciliation to address the root causes behind each humanitarian crisis.

Ethiopia: "Disaster could unfold at frightening speed"

¶2. (U) In his first official visit to Ethiopia, Holmes attempted to follow up on the findings of the September 2007 UN assessment mission that raised concern about a humanitarian crisis unfolding in the Ogaden section of the Somali region due to the closure of commercial trade routes and restrictions by the Government of Ethiopia (GOE) on humanitarian access, including for food aid deliveries. In Addis Ababa Holmes met with government officials (including Prime Minister Meles Zenawi), representatives of the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), and the African Union. He also visited Jijiga, the regional capital, and Kebredhar (where he saw a food distribution that he noted "might have been staged" for his visit.)

¶3. (U) Holmes characterized the situation in Ogaden as not currently a "catastrophe," but he stressed that "a catastrophe could occur in the next few months if all the necessary action to avert it is not taken." (Holmes also noted that no one from the UN has been allowed to visit many

of the remote rural areas where the conflict has been worst, admitting that the situation could be more serious in those areas.) Holmes reported that the GOE disagrees with the findings of the UN assessment and generally feels that current claims of humanitarian need are exaggerated. He and the GOE "agreed to disagree" on the analysis of the crisis, but Holmes stated that he did receive some positive signals and a commitment that the GOE will take all necessary steps to avoid a famine in the region. Holmes reported that the UN has been allowed to open offices in two locations in the region, and he called on the Security Council to monitor the situation and encourage political progress.

Sudan: Needs in Darfur continue to grow

¶4. (U) Following four days in Sudan with a focus on the continuing humanitarian crisis in Darfur, Holmes stated that he believes the situation is "gradually deteriorating" and that the international relief operation remains extremely fragile. He expressed strong concern about continuing restrictions on humanitarian access as well as violence affecting civilians and aid workers, and he called for all parties to respect humanitarian principles that facilitate and safeguard the delivery of aid.

¶5. (U) Holmes reported that in meetings with the GOS he stressed the importance of strengthening trust and confidence between the government and the humanitarian community, including through full implementation of the Joint Communiqué that provides a framework for international access to Darfur. Holmes noted some progress as a result of the Joint

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Communiqué, but he cited a number of specific bureaucratic obstacles still remaining such as entry visas, exit visas for NGO workers and customs clearance for equipment. Holmes reported receiving assurances from the Government of Sudan that the "moratorium on restrictions" would be extended to facilitate the work of international NGOs. (Note: This agreement has not yet been officially extended.)

¶6. (U) Holmes reported that in his meetings GOS officials repeatedly suggested that some humanitarian staff in Darfur were engaged in activities that go beyond a humanitarian mandate. He countered that "monitoring and speaking up for the rights of civilians and respect for humanitarian law and principles are fundamental to humanitarian action." He appealed to the GOS to use the High Level Committee to address such concerns and not to resort to unilateral action such as the recent expulsion of the senior UN official from South Darfur.

¶7. (U) On the return of IDPs, Holmes noted that while some limited voluntary return has occurred with the support of the international community in South Darfur, large-scale returns can only take place when conditions are safe. He stressed that returns must be "free of pressure or coercion" and that conditions for large-scale returns in Darfur do not yet exist. He also, however, reaffirmed the UN's commitment to work with the GOS when the conditions are appropriate.

¶8. (U) Holmes noted that humanitarian needs continue to grow in Darfur and that the 2008 Work Plan for Sudan will appeal for \$825 million. He described the humanitarian operation in Darfur as "increasingly fragile," and morale among aid workers as lower than his last visit in March. Holmes reiterated that the political and military context in Darfur is continually shifting and he stressed that an inclusive peace agreement reinforced by a peace-keeping force capable of protecting civilians is urgently needed. While the focus of his recent trip to Sudan was Darfur, Holmes also emphasized the fundamental importance of the North-South relationship.

Somalia: "Single largest IDP gathering in the world today"

¶9. (U) Holmes' one-day trip to Somalia allowed him to visit a 15-kilometer stretch of road between Mogadishu and Afgooye where up to 230,000 displaced people have recently sought refuge from violence in the capital. Holmes characterized the situation as the single largest IDP gathering in the world. Despite huge challenges in security and access, Holmes reported that some relief efforts now reach these makeshift communities. Holmes noted, however, that virtually all humanitarian activities are implemented through local partners or national staff due to ongoing security concerns, including extortion and violence at check-points and roadblocks.

¶10. (U) In Baidoa Holmes met with the newly appointed Prime Minister of the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG), Nur Hassan Hussein. Holmes reported that they discussed the humanitarian situation, the need for better protection of civilians, particularly in Mogadishu, and ways to overcome the mistrust between the TFG and the international humanitarian community. According to Holmes the Prime Minister cited humanitarian relief, security, and political reconciliation as his top three priorities. Without providing specific recommendations for action, Holmes called on the international community not to abandon Somalia.

UNSC members express concern but few new ideas

¶11. (U) All members expressed continuing concern about the humanitarian situation in Darfur, and nearly all noted the need for a comprehensive political solution to address the humanitarian crisis. Many noted the role of the Security Council in monitoring and supporting the political process, while South Africa, the U.S. and the UK called specifically for the accelerated deployment of UNAMID. Many expressed concern over pressure on some displaced groups in Darfur to

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return home, and Indonesia stressed that all returns must be safe and voluntary. The U.S., the UK and Belgium specifically challenged the recent expulsion of the senior UN officer from South Darfur, and many members called for increased commitment by the GOS to lift bureaucratic and operational restrictions.

¶12. (U) Italy called Somalia "a test case for the credibility of the UN." The U.S. reiterated the need for peacekeeping contingency planning by the UN for Somalia, which was supported by Italy, and many noted the need for a strengthened the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). France noted the recent role of its navy in protecting World Food Program deliveries to Somali ports, citing initial success in avoiding further incidents of piracy.

¶13. (U) On Ethiopia, the UK welcomed the idea of a high-level forum on Ogaden, to be convened by the UN Resident Coordinator (RC), and urged the RC to fix a date as soon as possible. The UK also expressed support for monthly meetings between the GOE and NGOs in Addis Ababa.

¶14. (U) The complete U.S. statement, delivered by the Political Minister Counselor, can be found on the USUN web site: www.un.int/usa.
Khalilzad